

A billion just isn't what it seems to be anymore

By Roger Boye

Here are answers to more questions from Chicago Tribune readers.

Q—What's a "billion coin"? Is it worth a billion?

P.R., Schaumburg

A—"Billion" is a mixture of cheap metal, such as copper, with a smaller amount of silver. That coinage alloy was popular in the ancient world but rarely is used today.

Q—With all the talk of an Elvis Presley stamp, I am wondering if the Great One will appear on a U.S. coin any time soon.

M.T., Evanston

A—The chances are nil. There's no legislation in Congress to authorize such coinage. Besides, government practice dictates that a person must be dead before his likeness can go on a coin.

Q—We've got dozens of foreign coins that read "Helvetica" and "Deutsches Reich." Where were they made?

R.T., Chicago

A—Switzerland and Germany.

Q—Why does the government bother to put mint marks on coins? Who cares if a dime was made in Philadelphia or Denver?

E.T., Calumet City

A—Officials use mint marks to trace poorly made coins to their point of origin. Such letters also promote the national mints.

Q—Eureka! I got a gold 1986 Washington quarter in change from a vending machine where I work. How much is it worth?

J.B., Naperville

A—Would you believe 25 cents? Most likely, someone treated your coin with a chemical or plated it with a gold-colored alloy because the government has made no Washington quarters out of gold—in error or on purpose. By the way, it takes just a few cents' worth of pure gold to

plate a quarter.

Q—Do the Canadian dimes and quarters I sometimes get in change contain silver? If so, how much are they worth?

B.N., Chicago

A—Canada eliminated silver from the two coin types in mid 1968. Since then, they've been made with nickel.

Q—I own several Lincoln cents from the 1980s that are missing the tiny "FG" on the tails side. Are they valuable?

B.T., Chicago

A—No. Those two letters sometimes fail to appear because of a problem in the minting process called "filled die," but such coins have little value as collectibles. "FG" are the initials of Frank Gasparro, who created the Lincoln Memorial design.

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In five weeks, Uncle Sam will discontinue the special coinage program that is raising money for a Korean War veterans memorial to be built in Washington, D.C.

So far, officials have sold about 80 percent of the one million silver dollars they are authorized to make, netting nearly \$6 million in surcharges for the memorial.

To order a proof silver dollar for \$31 or an uncirculated specimen for \$26, call, toll free, 1-800-862-7100. Sales will end on March 31.